

# Who Do We Think We Are?

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church  
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## **Galatians 6:11-18**

*As far as Paul was concerned, it was another gospel, which was no gospel at all. It was a desperate clinging to the old creation when the new had come. It was characterized by division and dissension rather than by unity and peace. It was giving heed to the opponents of Christ rather than to Christ himself. Paul would have nothing to do with it. And, as far as he was concerned, the church should have nothing to do with it either. So Paul dictated a letter to the churches of Galatia. The scribe carefully recorded his words – several pages' worth. Then Paul took the pen into his own hand to write his closing remarks.*

See how big the letters are when I write to you with my own hand!

People who want to make a good showing in the flesh — they are the ones who compel you to be circumcised, but only so they won't be persecuted for the cross of Christ. The circumcised don't keep the law themselves, but they want you to be circumcised so they can boast about your flesh. May I never boast, except about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world! Because neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but new creation is.

People who follow this standard — peace and mercy be upon them and upon God's Israel.

From now on, let no one cause me troubles, because I bear the marks of Jesus in my body.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.

## **Our World Belongs to God 42**

The church is a gathering  
of forgiven sinners called to be holy.  
Saved by the patient grace of God  
we deal patiently with others  
and together confess our need  
for forgiveness and grace.  
Restored in Christ's presence,  
shaped by his life,  
this new community lives  
the story of God's reconciling love,  
announces the new creation,  
and works for a world of justice and peace.

## **Children's Story**

Once there was an island filled with misfit toys.

There was a squirt gun that shot grape jelly. There were a polka dot elephant and a Charlie-in-the-box. There was a cowboy who rode an ostrich. And there was a PlayStation that plugged into the refrigerator.

An island filled with misfit toys. They were the unhappiest toys you've ever seen.

Do you know why those misfit toys were unhappy? Because no one wanted them. Who would?

Squirt guns are supposed to squirt water, not grape jelly. The guy in-the-box is supposed to be named Jack, not Charlie. And a PlayStation is supposed to plug into the TV, not into the refrigerator!

Who would want messed up toys like that? No one, that's who!

But what if we were all messed up misfits? Do you think maybe that would make a difference for all those misfit toys? Do you think maybe that would make a difference for people, too?

### Sermon

Anne Lamott is a member of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Marin City, California. She loves her church. I love her church. I'm sure God loves her church, too, and for the same reason. Because St. Andrew church has room for Anne Lamott (and for lots of other folks, too).

Anne Lamott is a best-selling author. Three of her books, including her latest, are about faith, Christian faith. Yet Anne Lamott is hardly what you would call a poster child for Jesus. Her past is messy. And her present is messy, too. She stumbles through life. She hurts people. She remains a work in progress.

And her church makes room for her. There she is forgiven. There she is saved, again and again, by grace. There what matters is that she is, by grace, God's child. No wonder she loves her church.

The church is not a community of perfected people. To use the language of our testimony, **the church is a gathering of forgiven sinners**. This means that, in ourselves, we in the church are no different than anyone else.

Each person we meet is made in the image of God. There's a dignity, there's a glory that each person has — whether we're talking about Ted Strickland in the governor's mansion or the girl behind the counter at Tim Horton's who hardly speaks English. Each person we meet is made in the image of God. At the same time, each person we meet is a sinner. The image is blurred. Governor Strickland has his shadow-side. (I won't speculate on the details.) And so does the young Latina at Tim Horton's.

And, of course, we too are blurred reflections of God's image. We are prone to acts of kindness and generosity. And we are prone to lapses into meanness. There is a muddy grandeur about us. In the church we know this about ourselves and about each other.

Like any honest family, we have our issues. Some of us have embarrassing habits. Some of us pick fights. Some of us drink too much. Some of us are depressed. Some of us love to give advice, even when it hasn't been asked for. Some of us are thick-headed. Some of us have wandering eyes. And so on.

Here's what matters. Because of God's patient grace toward us, we, at our best (and, of course, we don't often reach our best, but for a moment I want to draw an ideal picture of us in our brokenness) — we, at our best, are patient with each other. At our best, we own up to our own faults and failures. At our best, we make room for each other and for our weaknesses. At our best, we ask for forgiveness. And at our best, we grant forgiveness, even when it hasn't been asked for. Because we know who we are. We are sinners — forgiven, but still sinners.

**And for sinners like us, the cross of Christ matters more than all else.** Churches in the province of Galatia in the first century were tempted to put something else before the cross. They were being told that, to belong to the God and Father of Jesus Christ, to be among the children of Abraham, they had to be circumcised (the men anyway). In other words, as is the case these days with certain tattoos and piercings, a mark in their flesh would be essential to their identity.

Paul rejected this notion completely. To be a child of God, to belong to Jesus Christ, is a gift, is a new creation, is like being born all over again, is an act of God's grace. It's not about adopting a particular outward appearance. It's not about keeping a particular set of rules. It's not about first scrubbing clean the mess your life is in. No, it's about receiving life from the hand of God. It's about stepping into the kingdom. It's about taking a seat at the banquet table. It's about lifting a cup and joining in the song.

**Next Sunday, we'll meet at the Lord's table.** Who do we think we are to be there? Why, we're sinners. And it's a table for sinners. Every room in our house might be a mess, every corner may be cluttered, but there's always room at the table, the feast is always spread.

I'll say again what I've said before: this table should be set with bread and wine every Sunday. Here's some true confessions, though. For a few years now, we've been celebrating Holy Communion weekly during Advent/Christmas and during Lent/Easter. But when we reach the end of those seasons, I'm ready for a simpler service without the sacrament. I'm ready for a break. You may be, too. But, it's not about what I want or what I'm ready for. And it's not about what you want or what you're ready for. It's about the nature of the sacrament and the nature of God's grace itself.

Set this table every Sunday with bread and wine, and here's what will happen — maybe not right away, but over time. Over time you will come to the table when you're not ready. You will come to the table when you're a mess. You'll come when you clearly don't deserve it. And on that day, Christ will give himself to you. Because this feast, like the cross, is a gift of grace, grace that is given again and again and again, whether we're worthy or not. And we're never worthy!

Here's a true story. In the summer of 1987, when I was a candidate for the ministry, I accepted a call to be the pastor of the Christian Reformed Church in N. We made plans to move there in September. But something happened before we made the move.

It was a hot summer Sunday morning. At the end of the worship service, members of the congregation filed out the front doors of the church building onto the lawn, which was right along Main Street. They were surprised by what they saw: a middle-aged man and a woman a few years older were fighting. She was swinging her purse at him, and he was trying to fend off her blows, hitting her in the process. The man and the woman were members of the church.

The congregation was taken quite aback. They had never seen such a thing. Of course, they talked about it. They tried to explain it. And many of them wound up choosing sides. It was ugly all around.

In the face of this situation, the consistory, advised by the church's counselor, placed the entire congregation under ecclesiastical discipline. That meant there would be no celebrations of Holy Communion. Not until things had been put right. That's how it stood when I came to be the church's pastor.

At the time, I thought the consistory's action was courageous. It was an unheard of step, but it hammered home to the congregation that it was not ready for the sacrament, that it was unworthy. When I think about it now, I still think the consistory's decision was courageous. I also think it was wrong.

How much better it would have been for the church to come to the table humbled, broken, chastised, begging for grace — which is what we do every time we come to the table. We are never worthy. How much more in keeping with the nature of sacrament and of God's grace it would have been for the sacrament to be given and received at a time of obvious brokenness. Perhaps instead of having no sacrament in such a time of trouble, it would have been even better for the consistory to have set the table and served the sacrament every Sunday, so that the congregation would have come again and again until they were reconciled, would have come each week to the fount of grace until God made them whole.

**The table is at the heart of the life of the church.** Through this table, we stand together at the foot of the cross, where there's room for N. and N., where there's room for you and me, where there's room for Anne Lamott — room for messed up people with messy lives, which is exactly who we think we are and who God loves.